

governed their off-duty lives. Deaconesses derived personal satisfaction from their work but little else. Only after 1905 were they automatically entitled to financial support.<sup>67</sup> It was difficult for them to remain content as servants of the Church as more and more better paying positions in benevolent work opened up. In 1911 deaconesses received room, board, several minor allowances, and \$10 a month. 'Many deaconesses,' a pastor reported that year, 'simply will not, as one expressed it, "sponge" on their friends and relatives.'<sup>68</sup>

'The whole matter now agitating the Deaconess work,' as the General Board phrased it in December 1911, centred on administration and remuneration, two issues that Alice Chown had exposed within the context of her broader attack on the movement. In early 1912 the General Board replaced the ailing acting principal, Ora McElhenie, with the Reverend George Bishop and granted deaconesses larger travel expenses. In 1913 the monthly allowance increased to \$12, and probationers succeeded in reducing the demands on them by winning the suspension of reading course examinations. 'Peace and harmony ... prevailed,' at least for the time being.<sup>69</sup>

Modest as these reforms were, they set a precedent for the many which followed. Methodists who brought to light the glaring inconsistencies within the Church and who applied the logic of the women's rights movement to deaconess work helped to shape the transformation. How could some churchmen, they queried, complain in good conscience of clergymen's poor wages, preach sexual equality, or condemn the sweatshop and the 'white slave trade' and at the same time remain insensitive to the needs of their own deaconesses?<sup>70</sup> One critic struck at the heart of paternalistic religious teachings and the social norms they sanctioned by questioning the validity of what was considered to be the true reward of all Christian women. She complained that the volunteer ethos governing a deaconess's relationship to the Church, like that governing a wife's relationship to marriage, 'tends to develop in women who go into this work an undue and exalted idea of themselves religiously because they do it all out of love for board and clothes ... As long as women ... put up with this sort of thing,' she concluded, 'just so long will the Church utilize women to work for nothing.'<sup>71</sup>

67 ARDS, 1904-5, Board of Management, 18.

68 *Christian Guardian*, 29 Nov. 1911, 24-5.

69 DSBM 4, 29 Dec. 1911, 139, to 19 Apr. 1913, 33; ARDS, 1911-12, Toronto Conference, 18; 1912-13, 2.

70 *Christian Guardian*, 26 Feb. 1913, 28-9. See also 3 June 1914, 21; and 15 Mar. 1911, 21.

71 *Ibid.*, 30 Jan. 1917, 10.

But the reconstruction of deaconess work was above all else a pragmatic response to a changing environment. In 1913 a shortage of deaconesses developed which reflected not only the smaller number entering the work,<sup>72</sup> but also the rise of an equally disturbing phenomenon. Leaving the order after several years of service was the usual work pattern of women. Traditionally, less than 20 per cent served more than ten years, many deaconesses resigning to marry or to return to their families. Increasingly, however, deaconesses were taking leaves of absence and using their skills in more lucrative employment. It was the influence of these deaconesses on the movement which concerned promoters by 1916.<sup>73</sup> Just as alarming, the pre-war depression which cut into the funding of the work had been replaced by a deepening war crisis that brought competition from other organizations for financial support.<sup>74</sup> The Rest Home and the Rest Fund were not adequate to care for ailing and retired deaconesses, nor were promoters succeeding in cancelling the new Training School debt. Several churches were forced to abandon the work, and by 1917 at least one Home was in serious financial difficulty.<sup>75</sup> Deaconess work required extensive reform.

Promoters met the challenge by attempting to broaden the movement's appeal to Methodism and by seeking to make it more attractive to deaconesses. In 1914 the Methodist General Conference granted the work a new charter and status which made it eligible for support and co-operation from the Educational Society. Although a major fund-raising campaign failed to meet expectations and in 1915 the Massey family and Joseph Wesley Flavelle were called upon to retire the Training School debt, the General Board nevertheless put in motion plans for the creation of an expensive superannuation fund for deaconesses.<sup>76</sup> The following year it raised their monthly allowance to \$15 and modified the stationing policy to allow for the indefinite renewal of an appointment. In 1917 the General Board substituted the principle of government by 'mutual consent' for the older provision that deaconesses were 'subordinate' to the superintendents of the local

72 ARDS, 1912-13, Montreal Conference Deaconess Aid Society, 38; Manitoba Conference Board of Management, 43. Between 1911 and 1913 24 women became probationers; between 1907 and 1910 46 women did so.

73 DSBM 4, 19 Apr. 1916, 56. Twenty-four of the 80 deaconesses were on leaves of absence. No figure is given for the number of deaconesses on leave but employed by other organizations.

74 DSBM 4, Report 1914-15, 45; ARDS, 1914-15, Toronto Conference, 2; 1916-17, Hamilton Conference, 6.

75 DSBM 4, 12 Feb. 1915, 151-2; 19 Apr. 1912, 27; ARDS, 1917 and 1918, Hamilton Conference, 1917, 3.

76 *Journal*, 1914, 97, 292; DSBM 4, 12 Feb. 1915, 15; 16 Apr. 1915, 151.

Homes. It also gave to Annual Conference Boards the power to decide whether or not deaconesses were required to live in the Homes and abandoned the policy of having pastors report on the work of deaconesses.<sup>77</sup>

Before 1918 the Deaconess Society did not have a clear mandate to 'solicit' contributions, only to 'receive' them. The Methodist General Conference of that year obligingly rectified the matter; it also amended the Constitution to include several other new provisions. Four years earlier the reference to deaconesses as 'aids to the pastors' had been omitted, although they were still described as being in 'voluntary service.' The 1918 Constitution did not include the latter phrase and for the first time recognized deaconesses as 'paid' workers. Deaconesses were also given representation on the General Board and received permission to raise funds. The regulations governing their dress were relaxed, and employers were granted the freedom to increase the monthly stipend above a recommended minimum of \$20.<sup>78</sup> Summing up his impression of the impact of the reforms and giving voice to the optimism which so marked Canada in 1918, the Reverend Hiram Hull, George Bishop's successor to the principalship of the work, declared that 'the growing spirit of democracy and the disposition to consult the wishes ... of our workers, has resulted in establishing a very strong *Esprit de Corps* ... Remuneration does not matter,' he suggested, 'for the dollar has lost its hold. They seek only an opportunity to serve.'<sup>79</sup>

Hull's declarations proved unfounded. After 1918 the number of deaconesses in active service continued to decline, and Methodism's indifference towards their work – a phenomenon that promoters began to complain of just prior to the war – showed no signs of abating.<sup>80</sup> The post-war expansion of women's church and social service work and the contraction of their own movement frustrated deaconesses and promoters alike. 'Before the days of organized charity I did much of the work for the poor,' a deaconess reminded Methodists. 'We hail with pleasure the increased opportunities for service,' a promoter exclaimed. 'At the same time we ask ourselves: "What effect will this enlargement of opportunities for service and the increased educational preparation of workers have upon the Deaconess service of the Church?"' Her prognosis was favourable, 'but do not let

77 ARDS, 1915-16, Toronto Conference Board of Management, 21, viii; DSBM 4, 19 Apr. 1917, 62-4

78 *Journal*, 1914, 97, 292; 1918, 125, 182, 305; DSBM 4, 19 Apr. 1918, 69-70

79 ARDS, 1917 and 1918, Report 1918, 7-8

80 ARDS, 1913-14, Toronto Conference Deaconess Aid Society, 15-16; Hamilton Conference Board of Management, 29; 1919 and 1920, Toronto Conference Deaconess Aid Society, 51-2

us change in any essential way,' she added, 'the beloved, honored office of the Deaconess, whose service is marked by absolute forgetfulness of self.'<sup>81</sup> Deaconesses thought otherwise. Those who hoped to receive the \$40 a month their colleagues in Manitoba and Nova Scotia earned in 1921 were disappointed. In a close vote the General Board settled on a recommended minimum of \$30.<sup>82</sup> And again, there were administrative problems. The Reverend Hull did not enjoy the full confidence and support of the diaconate.<sup>83</sup> In 1922 twenty-six deaconesses made their grievances public. In a startling memorial to the Methodist General Conference they declared that in comparison to the other avenues open to women, deaconess work was 'steadily losing ground' and requested that if the Church could not pass remedial legislation it disband the order and employ them on another basis.<sup>84</sup>

The memorial impressed upon the General Conference the need for immediate action, and it responded by passing several proposals calculated to improve the unhappy state of affairs. Most important, it established a Commission composed of four men and one woman which presented its extensively researched Report to the deaconess General Board in March 1923. By pointing to the insensitive administration and poor financial support of deaconess work, the Commissioners confirmed one observer's contention that 'the troubles' were the result of deaconesses being unjustly regarded as 'servants of the Church' and echoed his call for the creation of 'a genuine self-governing deaconess democracy.'<sup>85</sup> The Report went further, however, in identifying factors contributing to the 'almost universal [dissatisfaction] throughout Canadian Methodism' with the movement. Noting the 'low educational standard, defects of character and training in Deaconess workers [and a] lack of appreciation ... of the value of women's work in the Church,' the Commissioners were nevertheless unanimous in their desire to see it continue. To that end they made twenty recommendations designed to recast the diaconate into a well-educated, skilled work force enjoying more self-government, a broad mandate, and a greater degree of support from the Church.<sup>86</sup>

The General Board proved receptive to those proposals which

81 ARDS, 1919 and 1920, 18-19. See also *Christian Guardian*, 16 Nov. 1921, 11, 18

82 ARDS, 1919 and 1920, Report, 9-10; DSBM 4, 15 Oct. 1921, 92

83 UCA, Deaconess Society of the Methodist Church, box 2, file 10, James Action to S.D. Chown, 26 Jan. 1922; Edith May Sherwin Biography File, Sherwin to Winifred Thomas, 30 June 1924; Commission Inquiry of the General Conference, Methodist Church; Report to the General Board of Management of the Deaconess Society [Commission Report], 3, in DSBM 4, 2 Mar. 1923, 250

84 *Journal*, 1922, 331; Commission Report, 2-3

85 *Christian Guardian*, 25 Oct. 1922, 11

86 Commission Report, 4-13

would enhance the professional status of deaconess work. It set a higher standard of admission for entry into the Training School, agreed to give students more specialized training and supervised practical experience in social service and educational work, and persuaded the Victoria College faculty to assume 'as far as possible' the entire Training School teaching load. The General Board also adopted the recommendation that deaconess work should expand to include all forms of Christian service undertaken by Methodist women. And for the first time it established a mandatory minimum salary, set at \$780.<sup>87</sup>

The General Board reacted cautiously, however, to the Commissioners' proposal that the Reverend Hull's successor be a man. Eventually Winnifred Thomas, a woman of considerable church work and YWCA experience, accepted the appointment.<sup>88</sup> Caution also marked the General Board's response to those proposals which, if adopted, would have dramatically increased the powers of deaconesses within the movement. The Commissioners had been impressed by the degree of control over their own work that American Methodist Episcopal deaconesses exercised. Arguing that the standing of their Canadian counterparts 'should eventually be made ... similar to, or even identical with, that of ministers of our church, in all that concerns their own special tasks,' the Commissioners were convinced that the most important reforms in the meantime were those which increased the recommendatory powers and representational rights of deaconesses.<sup>89</sup> Revealingly, the General Board was silent on the separate but equal doctrine; it sanctioned deaconess conferences with recommendatory powers and gave deaconesses the right to sit on Annual Conference Boards. But the number of deaconesses on the General Board was increased from one to three, not to six, as the Commissioners had recommended.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> DSBM 4, 2 Mar. 1923, 250, to 12 Apr. 1923, 264. In general the new minimum admission standard became university matriculation or a teaching certificate. Since 1917 high school graduation had been strongly recommended if the applicant sought employment in Christian work.

<sup>88</sup> Despite the 1922 General Conference vote of 139 to 86 in favour of recommending the appointment of a woman, the Commissioners argued that there was widespread support for their proposal. Closer ties with Victoria, they maintained, dictated the choice of a man. After the Rev. F.C. Langford, a Victoria professor, wisely turned down the appointment, the General Board quickly offered it to Thomas and was relieved to hear of her acceptance. DSBM 4, 2 Mar. 1923, 252, to 21 May 1923, 213.

<sup>89</sup> Commission Report, 7-8, 13.

<sup>90</sup> DSBM 4, 2 Mar. 1923, 250, to 12 Apr. 1923, 264. As if to confirm an historical stereotype, Winnipeg promoters had a reputation for progressive management. Deaconesses had been granted representation on the Manitoba Conference Board much earlier. *Christian Guardian*, 20 Dec. 1911, 27.

Several factors probably account for the General Board's failure to grant deaconesses what even approached a separate but equal status with the clergy. Although the harmonious negotiations between Methodists and Presbyterians which led to the amalgamation of the two deaconess societies did not begin until 1925, the General Board had struck a committee to prepare for Church Union in 1921. Members of the General Board were anxious that the transition proceed firmly under their control and as smoothly as possible. So too they were always aware of the complex and difficult nature of financing and managing the movement. Since 1918 the General Board had been labouring to untangle the confusing administrative web which had developed as a result of the work's haphazard growth. Only in 1924 was this task largely complete.<sup>91</sup> These very practical considerations should not mask the conviction undoubtedly held by many of the General Board's members and by their successors in the United Church: deaconesses were not capable of administering the work; nor was it proper that they do so.<sup>92</sup>

By the same token, deaconesses have left no evidence to suggest that they sought a separate but equal status with the clergy. Their conference recommendations after 1923 included requests for increased representational rights, but as the 1922 memorial indicated, and as the bulk of the conference recommendations attested, there was a point past which deaconesses would not venture.<sup>93</sup> They judged their status within the context of the prevailing norms governing Methodist women's work and framed their expectations accordingly. When asked for her suggestions as to how the new United Church might best

<sup>91</sup> ARDS, 1917 and 1918, Report 1918, 6, 17-19; DSBM 4, 14 Oct. 1919, 81, to DSBM 5, 4 June 1926, 93.

<sup>92</sup> A successor to the Methodist Deaconess General Board, the Committee on the Deaconess Order and Women Workers of the United Church included in its membership of approximately 30, 2 representatives from the diaconate. UCA, *The Manual of the Deaconess Order, the United Church of Canada* (issued 1940), 27-8.

<sup>93</sup> Deaconesses recommended that they be paid between \$900 and \$1,200, according to seniority; that 3 of their number be appointed to the stationing committee; that they be given representation on the several Deaconess Aid Society executives; and that the Training School Calendars distinguish between deaconess and general courses. The General Board took no action on the first two recommendations; ruled the third was unconstitutional and approved the fourth and fifth. DSBM 5, 5 Oct. 1923, 8; 4 Mar. 1924, 17-18; 6 Nov. 1924, 41-2; 4 June 1926, 91. At the very least, pastors enjoyed an equal voice with laymen in matters pertaining to the clergy. Officially, then, deaconesses limited their requests to a larger role in the decision-making process, together with higher salaries and the status of a distinctly trained group of workers. The salary range suggests that deaconesses sought parity with women missionaries, who, incidentally, made considerably less than their male counterparts. UCA, *Annual Report, Woman's Missionary Society*, 1924-5, xxxi-v.

improve the work, a veteran probably spoke for most deaconesses when she replied that 'they should have the same status as women doing similar work, such as missionaries etc.'<sup>94</sup>

What deaconesses had sought and achieved after 1910 was the transformation of their work into a salaried career. While religious volunteerism would always help to define their vocation, its ideals were susceptible to erosion by an evolving professional consciousness amongst deaconesses who witnessed growing numbers of Christian women enter the helping professions without compromising their piety. This evolution the Training School unwittingly encouraged by embracing so enthusiastically the preparation of women for the several branches of religious and benevolent work. Yet deaconesses who entered the order after 1916 were twice as likely as the women who preceded them to serve for more than ten years. This fact suggests that a higher degree of satisfaction resulted from the reforms and perhaps accounts for the heightened self-confidence and assertiveness deaconesses subsequently demonstrated. Although still poorly paid, by Church Union deaconesses had won a minimum wage, a pension, a voice in the administration of their work, and an increased measure of freedom in determining their dress, their place of employment, and their residence. No longer were they servants of the Church in the earlier and limited definition of that term.

The successes of deaconess work had been many. Arising from a marriage of maternal feminist idealism and the reform gospel, the union given impetus by philanthropic calculation, the deaconess movement rode the crest of the Laurier boom and became a familiar, if now largely forgotten, feature of Canadian Methodism. By the 1920s Methodists contributed as much as \$75,000 a year to the work of deaconesses who, throughout the history of the order, ministered to the needs of many thousands of Canadians.<sup>95</sup>

But the deaconess order could not command an authority sufficiently robust to raise it above the position of a minor Church office. The non-sectarian solutions to the problems of social welfare and social order that Methodists joined other Canadians in pursuing, circumscribed the size of the diaconate, deprived it of a substantial institutional infrastructure, and relegated it to a subsidiary role in women's

94 UCA, Flora Leone Winter Biography File, Biography Form, 192?

95 The sum was compiled from the several Conference reports, ARDS, 1921 and 1922. Jesse Sweetman, a travellers' aid worker at Toronto's Union Station, was perhaps Methodism's busiest deaconess. In one war year Sweetman assisted 12,549 travellers, 564 of whom she directed to the several inexpensive Church and non-denominational residences in the city. UCA, *The Methodist Union of Toronto* (pamphlet 1918?), n.p.

social service work. At the same time, Methodism's accommodation of the social sciences helped to legitimate the secular authority of the helping professions<sup>96</sup> which offered women a status that deaconess work could not duplicate. Despite the efforts of promoters and deaconesses to enhance its professionalism, the deaconess order continued to decline in importance in the United Church.<sup>97</sup>

Yet the winds of secularism and the anomalous achievements of religious liberalism only magnified the diaconate's central weakness. If the needs of the body were increasingly the province of the helping professions, there remained the deaconess's evangelical mission. But the deaconess worked in the shadow of the clergyman, the measure of her authority inseparable from her sex. Neither the romantic and sacrificial volunteerism with which promoters shrouded the work for so long, nor the professional ethos which largely replaced it were intended to remove deaconesses from that shadow. The rhetoric of separate but equal proponents notwithstanding,<sup>98</sup> Methodism was unprepared to invest in a women's order the charisma of office which largely defines the clergy's status and sets it apart from the professions in a secular society.<sup>99</sup> Deaconess work was expendable.

The Church demanded much from deaconesses and gave them little; Methodism fashioned a hierarchical division of labour in city church work and based it not on aptitude or talent but on sex; deaconesses themselves coveted the status of women missionaries but not the legitimacy of clergymen. All of these were among the legacies of maternal feminism. The case of Methodist deaconess work attests to the misspent energies of that strategy.<sup>100</sup>

96 Allen, *The Social Passion*, chap. 18, makes the same point on a larger scale.

97 The United Church adopted a broad definition of deaconess work. Excepting the 39 deaconesses who worked as home or foreign missionaries and should be considered within that tradition for comparative purposes, the number of deaconesses in active service in 1944 stood at 26. *The First Fifty Years*, 19.

98 The American Methodist Episcopal deaconess movement, whose liberality had so impressed the Commissioners and which established an impressive number of welfare institutions, was nevertheless the victim of a similar decline after 1910. Mary Agnes Dougherty, 'The Methodist Deaconess: A Case of Religious Feminism,' *Methodist History*, xxi (Jan. 1983), 90-8. Dougherty, however, attributes the demise of ME deaconess work solely to the decline of the Social Gospel and to the rise of the helping professions.

99 Talcott Parsons, 'Professions,' *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David Sills, xii (1968), 536-8.

100 The United Church ordained its first woman minister, Lydia E. Gruchy, in 1936.

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